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ABSTRACT

There is growing concern that early childhood educators are not giving adequate attention to promoting their students' social development. This paper discusses the social developmental needs of young children, the importance of early intervention, and possible ways that early childhood educators can nurture healthy social skills through the school environment. The paper identifies childhood risk factors for social difficulties, including exposure to media violence and sex, negative role models, and fluctuating family environments. In addition, the paper discusses studies providing evidence that early identification, intervention, and prevention, along with caring environments and social skills training, have a positive effect on young children's social development. Specific curricula to promote social development are examined, including the High/Scope and traditional child-centered approach and the promotion of caring classroom communities. (Contains 23 references.) (KB)

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Why Can't Johnny Share?

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Abstract

This paper is a discussion of research done in regards to social development in young children. There is a growing concern that early childhood educators may not be placing the necessary attention on this area of the child's development. Childhood risk factors for social difficulties are much more prevalent today, as children are exposed to media violence and sex, negative role models, and fluctuating family environments. Studies show that early identification, intervention, and prevention, along with caring environments and social skills training, have a positive affect upon young children's social development. Also, there are specific curricula that promote social development more than others. I will discuss several studies and programs that can provide insight and direction to early childhood educators in working with high-risk children.

Social Development of the Young Child:

Why Can't Johnny Share?

Seen a gang of rough looking, leather-clad preschoolers wielding chains and switchblades in your back alley lately? Most likely not, but the child on the playground threatening others with a sharp stick may be headed in that direction. And if so, how can we change his path, so that he grows into a socially competent child, who has friends and respect for authority? The area of social development contains important skills that early childhood educators must teach, in order for young children to develop healthy social habits. This paper will discuss the social developmental needs of young children, the importance of early intervention, and possible ways that early childhood educators can nurture healthy social skills through the school environment.

Teaching young children to be polite, to respect their elders and to share their toys has not always been the sole responsibility of educators. Thirty years ago, schooling started at age 5 or 6 and children were (hopefully) taught these primary skills at home. But today, children are placed in learning centers as early as 6 weeks old, and stay for ten or more hours, five days a week. Early childhood educators who care for these young children must take partial responsibility for their social development.

It is also a fact that children's behavior has never been so obviously lacking in social skills and morals, such as respect and responsibility, as they appear to be today. The increasing ease that our culture displays, in regards to violent and provocative media, is negatively affecting our young (The National Television Violence Study, 1996). Impressionable children exposed to today's culture of violence are learning increasingly aggressive ways to solve conflicts and acquire what they want or need. Focusing on social development in early childhood education is crucial if we are to change the direction of our future generations. Even though early

childhood curriculum may teach children to become early readers, if we do not teach them to share and care, we have given them a skill they may use only in their remaining years on death row. Though teaching these little ones to add and take away may seem an important feat, if we have not taught them conflict resolution and negotiation skills, then we have failed to give them the most important skills of daily living.

Early childhood classrooms offer countless opportunities for the learning and practicing of social skills. The dynamics in even the youngest groupings give children the big picture---a taste of what the real world is like. In this environment, the child can experiment and learn how to live with others, how to instigate social interactions that bring satisfaction (or at least resolution), and how to communicate successfully.

Piaget (1932/1965) noted that by the time a child can speak, he or she is permeated with rules and regulations due to the environment and thus, an awareness and tolerance of these things begins to form. It is very difficult for children who have not had schedules or rules, boundaries or discipline, to build an initial awareness of social constructs. In today's world of latchkey kids, TV babysitters, and children raising children, the awareness and respect of other human beings and possessions is often a foundation that a child does not receive at home, but from the early childhood education program the child is enrolled in.

Dodge (1996) states that mental processes influenced by early experiences affect and determine the child's social behavior and conflict resolution skills later on. As children pass through the impressionable stages of development, negative risk factors in the child's environment (such as low socio-economic status and violence in the home) tend to encourage and reinforce negative behaviors. Negative actions and reactions are then 'embedded' into the child's mental processes, and are very difficult to change. Intervention at the earliest possible age

is crucial to disrupt this process and to teach and reinforce alternative social behaviors. Dodge states that as early as age 2 or 3, children may start to show signs of discipline problems that may be predictors to anti-social behaviors and conduct problems in middle school. Such behaviors may include rebelliousness towards adults, physical violence, stealing, lying, and constant conflict with others. The author also states that research studies done by Nicholas Hobbs and Susan Gray (see Hobbs, 1982; Gray & Klaus, 1982) show that early prevention has a stronger likelihood of long term success than intervention initiated after conduct problems have become chronic. For this reason, prevention, identification of risk factors and intervention, early in the child's life, is necessary. By identifying risk factors in young children, we can mediate and intervene on behalf of the high-risk child.

Much research has been done to identify what, in children's environments and experiences make them more at risk for developing social problems. One of the most predominant findings has to do with imitation. Young children are eager to imitate adults and older siblings, and much of children's role-play is mimicking behaviors that they see practiced in their environment. Listening to children's interactions in the class housekeeping area can be a clear indication of the social environment to which they are exposed. When children witness verbal and physical aggression as ways to deal with conflict, they emulate these same behaviors when trying to resolve their own conflicts. Clearly, modeling is an important way of teaching young children positive social behaviors. Katz and McClellan (1991) suggest, "…an important ingredient in fostering good peer relationships in young children is the opportunity for them to interact about something significant in the presence of adults who, when necessary, can suggest social strategies appropriate to the content in which they are to be applied" (p. 16).

Kemple, David, and Hysmith (1997) discovered that spontaneous teacher intervention in children's social interactions may be the most effective way of helping young children struggling with anti-social behaviors. The research study by Kemple et al. (1997) investigated both positive and negative forms of intervention. Positive interventions may consist of helping children to discover and empathize with others, redirecting a child, or asking questions to help the child discover other options to negative behavior. Negative interventions consist of time out and other punitive measures. When children exhibit anti-social behaviors, removing them from the situation may alleviate the problem temporarily, but it does not teach the child how to problem solve or to discover alternative actions.

Trawick-Smith (1998) calls positive interventions 'play training' and describes them as a strategy in which adults intervene in informal, though purposeful, ways in preschool children's play environments. Using play intervention can enhance many areas of development, but the social arena seems to be the areas that can most benefit from these interventions. Kemple et al. (1997) suggest that there is a need for more research in determining what factors (education, training, curriculum approaches) promote the teacher's ability to intervene in ways that support children's healthy social development.

Another case for early childhood identification and intervention of high-risk children is the prevention of gang membership. Howell, Hill, Hawkins, and Pearson (1999) state, "We should not wait until adolescence to begin gang prevention efforts...results suggest that (early) preventive interventions...could have a significant impact on gang membership" (p. 316). Though gang association seems hardly a concern for preschoolers, research done by Howell et al. (1999) shows that there are environmental factors that increase the likelihood of gang membership during the teen years. Such factors are termed 'childhood risk factors'. Risk

factors stated in the findings were: low attachment to school, failing grades, and poor social skills. Data from Seattle's Social Development Project (Howell et al.), dealing with gang prevention, shows that developing social skills early in life is crucial to a child's social competence. Adequate social skills allow a child to navigate in school and social environments effectively and with self competence.

Benninnga and Wynne (1998) state that it is the responsibility of adults to critically examine children's social environments and to design them so that these environments help our young people grow up to be mature, socially competent adults. Browning, Davis and Resta (2000) echo this statement in the results of an action study done with a class of first-graders. Researchers wanted to know that if children, provided with models of pro-social and alternative behaviors and conflict resolution, would actually use them. Tally sheets were used to note aggressive behavior during observation in the classroom. Analysis of these sheets showed that the amount of aggressive behaviors declined by 50% during the 8-week period, as adults interacted and modeled appropriate social behavior, conflict resolution, and effective communication skills. The authors stated that it is important to offer young children tools to communicate and problem-solve in a manner that promotes social harmony as well as resolution of conflicts. Studies done by Wittmer and Honig (1994) also showed that when teachers take time to encourage, facilitate, and teach pro-social behaviors, children's positive interactions increase and aggression decreases.

Research also shows that some curriculum approaches promote social development more successfully then others. The High/Scope Perry Preschool study (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997) assessed how three theoretically distinct preschool curriculum models promoted short term and long-term social development. The study followed sixty-eight children born in poverty,

who, at age 3 or 4, were randomly assigned to one of three curriculum groups. The study followed these children until the age of 23. The three curriculum groups consisted of the Direct Instruction approach, High/Scope curriculum, and the traditional Nursery School approach. The author's described Direct Instruction as an approach that is teacher-directed, with teacher-defined goals. High/Scope Curriculum is an open framework approach in which the teacher and child collaborate to plan and initiate activities. This approach comes from a constructivist background. The traditional Nursery school approach is child-centered and children's interests, needs and development determine the activities. This curriculum matches closely with the 'developmentally appropriate practices' (DAP) approach.

Findings summarized that the High/Scope and Nursery School groups showed a total of ten significant advantages over the Direct Instruction group, with the Direct Instruction group having no advantages over either of previously mentioned groups. Advantages, identified as positive outcomes, of the High/Scope and Nursery School approach students consisted of: a significantly decreased percentage of children needing treatment for emotional impairment or disturbance during their schooling, a much higher percentage of children participating in volunteer work, and fewer or no arrests for property crime. The High/Scope and the Nursery School groups did not differ significantly from each other. Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) concluded that the findings from this study suggest that goals for early childhood education should center on social skills development and approaches that allow the child choices, opportunities for collaborative work and control over his environment, as do the DAP and constructivist approaches. Because the studies were longitudal, they also were able to show that experiences in early childhood education have long term affects.

Jones and Gullo (1999) completed a study to evaluate if the DAP approach affected young children's social development. Using a social skills rating scale that measures cooperation, assertion, and self-control, the researchers assessed the children's social behaviors. Teacher's practices were measured through a questionnaire about classroom practices and beliefs. Children in classrooms that reflected DAP approaches rated higher in social competence skills then did those that were in developmentally inappropriate classes. The DAP approach also provides an environment for children to explore and learn as they interact with one another. This type of environment promotes independence and the ability to direct one's own tasks and behavior and offers constant opportunities for social interaction, thus building social skills and self-competency. Elkind (1986), believed that formal instruction in the early childhood classroom creates high levels of stress and frustration in the child, and that there is a lack of opportunities for the child to develop social skills.

Another familiar curricular approach that is receiving much attention is constructivism. Cummings and Harlow (2000) note that the construction of social knowledge depends on children's interaction with other children and adults. The authors discuss Piaget's constructivist theory, applying it to the social development in young children. Piaget (1932/1965) talks about two distinct stages in a child's development: heteronomy and autonomy. Heteronomy describes the way young children obey rules out of respect for adult and authoritative power, of which both can sometimes be coercive. This is conformity without question, or what Piaget calls 'unilateral respect'. Another fitting description may be 'blind faith', because the child sees the parent as godlike and rules are painstakingly followed. Autonomous development is the process of having respect for others and learning to give and take (the process of reciprocity). An autonomous child acts and reacts in accordance with beliefs and convictions he or she has

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formulated from social experiences. Ideally, the autonomous child will have learned the need of respect for others, and will have internal convictions to act in such a manner. Through social development, a child moves from reacting and acting due to rules and fear of authority, to one of reason and self-regulation.

Cummings, et al. (2000) states that Piaget believes it is the responsibility of the adult to move the child from heteronomy to autonomy by intervening in the child's social environment. This takes place through guided social experiences, respect for the child's perception and point of view, and through collaborative, problem-solving projects amongst teachers and children. This does not mean that children are given complete freedom to control the classroom. But the constructivist approach believes in refraining from coercive punishments, external motivators, and seeks to allow the child to experiment, have choices and make mistakes, and to learn from these mistakes.

Another aspect that researches have found influencing a young child's social development is the classroom environment and how the child perceives it. Classrooms are now being referred to as caring communities, as teachers seek to develop a nurturing, safe environment for young children (Nodding, 1995). The Child Development Project and Challenge to Care in Schools are two of the many new approaches being discussed and researched in education. These approaches share the goal of helping schools become caring communities of learners. Strong supporters of this movement believe that there is a need for complete reconstruction of the curriculum, placing the theme of care in the center (Nodding). Themes of care begin with caring for oneself, then moves to caring for intimate others, extending to caring for strangers and eventually to a global form of caring. Caring communities include cooperative and collaborative learning, a developmentally appropriate discipline technique (involving training

rather than punitive punishment), and outreach activities that embrace parents and the community (Goldstein, 1998). Eric Schaps, Developmental Studies Center president, is quoted by Wiley (2000) as saying, "…. our research shows that, regardless of the ethnic or economic composition of the school, the more children feel that their school community cares about them and meets their needs, the more likely they are…to thrive academically and socially"(p. 164).

Battistich, Schaps, Watson, and Solomon (1996) researched the Child Development Project, an elementary school curriculum that nurtures community development, social skills, and character growth. The main purpose of the program is to build stable, warm and supportive relationships among teachers and students. The program also works intensely to reduce the risk factors threatening young children's healthy social development. The CDP program is used in several elementary schools across the United States. Lowell Elementary School, situated in one of St. Louis' most socio-economically depressed, crime-ridden neighborhoods, has implemented this program with a great deal of success (Wiley, 2000). Results of research done by Battistich, et al. (1996) show that the CDP program gives a sense of a caring community and has also been found to decrease drug and alcohol abuse and delinquency among students.

As we watch the tragedy of school violence increase, where 6 year olds shoot 6 year olds, many wonder what action can and should be taken. Research shows that developing strong pro-social skills in young children through caring communities that utilize looping does make a positive difference. Meeting the child's specific needs (autonomy, belonging and competence), as well as identifying and intervening in the lives of high-risk youngsters, also has a positive effect on the youngest in the social chain. Character education is a social developmental issue that has become the topic of much research and public discussion. Educators and administrators

continue to explore different areas in early childhood education, looking for the most effective training, curriculum, and classroom environment that we can offer our young children.

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